

Tanz im August Special Edition 2020
Transkription | #3 Happy to Listen | ...Full of Stars ...My God It Is

My skin is black
My arms are long

My hair is woolly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
Inflicted again and again
What do they call me?
My name is Aunt Sarah

Yeah, I think that's it, actually.
It makes me think of what you write about in your chapter, Four Coloured Girls.
You know, the theatre play.
And this very enhancing sentence
when you mention that...

Ntozake Shange came up with the full title of: Four Coloured Girls
after attempting suicide several times
in her early twenties.

Imagine.

Just let me say it again.
Now, also having not only the image of your book cover
but also the imagery of that
because colours are important to set us in the visuality of what can be real.
Like the inscriptions you have in there.

In the chapter Four Coloured Girls,
which are chapters or poems,
or spells for the other world,
you write:

Ntozake Shange came up with the full title Four Coloured Girls
after attempting suicide several times in her early twenties.
This all changed, when one night,
while she was driving through Oakland, California,
she saw a huge rainbow and knew right then, that Black women have,
"as much right as the air and the mountains do" to survive.
What a powerful line.

I think this gave you power as well, actually,
in your time that you were also, with your friends at school.
Also, working on that play.
Yeah, performing Four Coloured Girls as a teenager during my high school production,
it was the first time, I got to reflect deeply
on what it means to occupy the space
of a coloured girl, a woman of colour, or a Black woman in the world.

There was something really profound
about getting up on stage on every day with a group of young women
and saying: Yes I am here. I exist.
I have as much right to that as the air and the mountains do
as Ntozake Shange said it herself.
I found it really moving to say things
like: I've found God in myself
and I loved her fiercely,"
at such a young age.
Because it was something that I didn't entirely understand –
what I was occupying at this time,
but it continued to feed me as an adult.
So it's one of the reasons why
Four Coloured Girls takes up an entire chapter
in my essay collection, in my book, This Is Major.
It's a reflection on not only the positive side of that
but also the idea of
the thought that Ntozake Shange had to take her own life.
What drives us to that point of not knowing whether or not
our survival is something that will manifest in the world as something good
and something important and something powerful.
It's something I'm constantly ruminating on
when it comes to my writing.

Exactly, I think it's not necessarily about saying:
This is better than something else.
Or: We are better than someone else.
But, it is.
You take it as it comes.

You know, I like how...
Before coming to that moment
when you describe how actually you have a good time with your friends in school,

that there was just one class that you shared all together
because I think the teachers knew
that when you're all together it's full of stars.
That actually one cannot even sense that there's something painful going on.
I think the reason why is that you come together
and you enhance yourselves with that energy of you.
So that while having also the play,
people are like:
Why are we not in there?
And of course certain people would think they are entitled to be
because they have always been everywhere.
Are you ever like: But that's it!
This is it!
Why would everyone, someone claim just to be in there?
This is also made for Black girls.
You have worked throughout that.

I wonder: when you say this was really an important moment in your life, how did you experience that school life with especially this group of friends?

Yes, school life for me was very hard.

We spent a lot of our time being excluded from different activities because of our gender or race.

We were elated to have this play

in which we were the humans that best embodied a story.

Because it was something —particularly growing up as a Black girl—

it was not something that I came across very often;

a story specifically written & designed to cast me as a main character.

So, it's a lot of where the title and idea of *This is Major* comes from.

That idea of what's it's been like

to always be cast as a minor character.

And what happens if I stop playing that supporting role and I take the stage.

As my friends and I did in *Four Coloured Girls*

and we are the main attraction.

What happens when you hear the story from that perspective,

from us not being on the sidelines.

What do you get out of learning from this very specific kind of joy

that comes out of

a very...

complicated and painful history

but also out of a lot of originality

and a lot of exuberance and audacity.

Where do we get to own those things?

What is it like if we just sit down and have a conversation between ourselves?

Those are a lot of the things I've learned out of that experience.

It's not having to be an envoy for non-Black people,

whether they be women or not.

To understand the experience of what it's like to live in my body

but to just to be able to live in my body

and to tell my story as if it's something that everybody understands.

Just wait until the moment where everybody starts to catch up

and say: "Hey, I really get this, I really jive with this."

It's one of the things...

You and I have talked a lot about how RnB and Hip Hop

have influenced us in growing up as its own kind of language.

It's definitely an extension of that.

Those were some of the first places I first started to understand

what it meant for me to have a culture,

for me to style my hair in certain ways,

or to use certain phrases.

Thinking about all the dances that we learned

between me and my girlfriends and my sister

and how all of that was our training ground for

our girlhood and our eventual womanhood.

And the ways we began to take on space as artists and cultural creators in the world.

It's interesting because the societies we live in –
I grew up in Berlin in Germany. I'm European.
I could go further: a society which has been thinking from the outside, the material.
The material as a body, but also material as something
that makes you believe that you need something
in order to live.
You need something from the outside in order to live.
Whereas, the earth gives you everything, every day.
So it's about call / response.
But at the time people make you think you need to work for a certain company
in order to sleep and eat and drink
you get—all the time!—in a rush.
There was a moment, when I was 17, that I experienced:
What is it all about?
They were telling you you had to work more,
to spend longer at school.
I had to skip a lot of my basketball training.
I've done it since I was eight so was like: Why?!
I don't understand!
I had to skip meeting friends.
They were like: That's it. We'll just go with it.
I don't think that's "it". That we should say this is "it".
Because this "it" doesn't move any more.
I was thinking when you were...
When you were underlining music so much
in your essays, in your poems,
how much you make me understand and realise that music is not the superficiality
that Western society makes you believe it is.
But it's on the inside. It's the interconnectivity
between energy, spirits, emotions, minds.
This is what attracted me to the previous book also:
I Think I'm Ready to See the Ocean
You reflect on Frank Ocean and the history...
Yeah, I do reflect on Frank Ocean.
I think they're... about music... There's something, I always felt,
they don't do it for business.
It's really the culture you mentioned.
And how Afro-Americans help me going through the moment –
People said to me: It's about material. You have to have a certificate.
You have to study, to work for someone.
What is it about it then? Do you live?
You make yourself lose energy so that someone gains superficiality.
It doesn't make any sense.
Or gains energy or anything!
But you're done before starting.
So... Frank Ocean.
Lauryn Hill, you mentioned.
Nina Simone.
All these people have felt they do it to come together,
as a culture and to enhance themselves, their identity.

The fact you say: I am.

It's very much an extension of the call and response culture you mentioned.

It's the African-American version of that and the diaspora and how it's evolved.

One of the reasons I consider it incredibly important is because commercially in terms of capitalism African-Americans are probably the most represented of American groups of people.

Because when people think about American art and culture and sports typically they're thinking about African-Americans.

So, this is a place where we have a real cultural cache and cultural capital but that doesn't translate into real world economics of what life is like for African-Americans.

Or, as we've seen in the past few months what politics and safety is like for African-Americans.

But it has always been a space culturally where we have created some of the world's biggest trends.

When it comes to sound, to dance, to clothing.

It's a place where we have continued to communicate with people...

our humanity, our frustration, anger, excitement, intimacy and beauty.

Those are things that have continued to be something that has appreciation

but something that sometimes gets lost in translation of what commercialism is, what capitalism is.

What the idea of seeing something that's packaged represents.

I like writing about musicians because I like writing about that other side of the cultural conversation.

What it means for them to make things and why they're making things.

How that goes beyond a passive understanding of who's listening.

It's really at the core of activist pursuit to be able to be seen as whole and autonomous people.

It's one of things that brings me most joy.

To write about it, to look at it.

We're going to look today at a couple of iterations of that in the stories I've written about Nina Simone,

and about Diana Ross

because these were the things that started to shape me and to shape my own artistic practice.

Yes!

Here's my favourite song!

Reach out and touch somebody's hand

Make this world a better place

If you can

Reach out and touch somebody's hand

Make this world a better place

Can we...

Take a little time out of your busy day
To give encouragement to someone who's lost their way

Try a little kindness You'll see
It's something that comes naturally
Can't they move the stage out?

We can change things
If we start giving

Reach out and touch
somebody's hand

I'm coming to you all!
Reach out!
Somebody's hand!

Is that it?

Reach out and touch somebody's hand

Let's see.

Can I get everybody's attention?

Reach out.

It's alright, we're going to get wet. That's ok!
I'm here!

Feels good actually!

Reach out! All the hands in the air. Come on!

I think it's our energy breaking the clouds!

Give me the other microphone, please.

Give me the other microphone, what?

Would everybody stay calm!

I'm here!

Just try to clench your feet in the ground
and put your hands to the sky. We'll stop the rain.

Sing with me! It feels good!

Reach out and touch somebody's hand

Make this world a better place if you can

Reach out and touch somebody's hand

Make this world a better place if you can
Reach out!
And touch!
Somebody's hand!
A better place if you can
Reach out!
Come on!
Hands in the air!

All right. Ladies and gentlemen,

I know it's difficult.
It's real calm on this side, so I figured they could do it, too.

There's no police pushing on this side.
Stand up straight.
Stand up. Put your hands in the air.
Everybody. Come on!
Stop it!
And stand it up!
This side is calm, you guys can be calm, too.
Don't push!

The rain has stopped.

I'm losing my voice.

I love you guys.

All right.
Ladies and Gentlemen,
I think the rain is stopping.
But, if any of you...
It took us...
It took me a lifetime to get here, I'm not going anywhere.

Are you afraid of the rain?

I won't melt!

Will you?

It's all right.
If we can make this work, we can make anything work, Baby.
Next song, we want to move on past the prophet to the next tune.
All right?
What is it?
Tell me what it is?

Wow!

You know, this song, and so many songs in your book, This is Major made me realise the power of the presence which comes a long way. As Diana Ross says: It took me a life to get here, I'm not going anywhere.

One of the things I love about that performance... That was Diana Ross' 1983 concert in Central Park. It was a concert she planned because she wanted to help build a playground in Central Park. The entire concert got flooded. When we hear her talking about "don't push" and about the rain, there was an actual torrential rainstorm happening that she performed through. Watching that performance, for me, it's one of the things I decided to write about in the book because it's one of the greatest feats of artistic intimacy that I've been privy to. The idea that she recognised the danger that not only the weather but also the possibility of police violence brought into that situation. Any time we enter into some kind of mob hysteria there's always the chance of people getting hurt. So, she picked this song, Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand... She made them change the order of when the songs were happening as a way to literally and figuratively reach out her hand to the audience and try to calm them down. To use the power of her music and the power of her presence to keep everybody safe. To bring them into a more present space I think that's really amazing, and one of those things we often lose when we talk about what art and performance is in pop culture. We don't think necessarily about pop stars having that kind of presence of mind and that kind of activism built into the work they're doing. That's a big part of Diana Ross' legacy that I like to examine and explore.

As you said, we talked about it before, it's not about commercialisation and all that. I think she didn't get any money out of that. It's her activism, wanting to contribute, right?

Yeah, she donated a lot of money. Because of the money they lost because of the show getting rained out her still wanting to donate so much money to charity, so it was really a labour of love. Just an incredible live concert if you have the chance to check it out on television, on all our television. It's true about the change of order. After that at some point she played Mindless Love just to... appease the tension. It's very strong. She's down on the edge of the stage with the audience

and reaches her hand out and really makes that physical and emotional connection with them. She said it repeatedly: I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I love, as you mentioned: It took me a lifetime to get here. She brings it into the cosmos of her larger constellation of being a Black person, being a Black woman, being a performer and how she is here for them and is not going anywhere. I think that's beautiful. From not going anywhere you reflect on her as being ahead of her time actually.

So, I would love for you... if you would like to share that moment in your reflections in your book.

So, here is an excerpt from the chapter called, Diana Ross is Major in a book called, This is Major, written by me.

Diana Ross is Major.

Diana Ross is the Black girl glorified.

Both shimmering and imperfect.

These qualities attracted her to the role of Dorothy back in 1977.

"I started doing a lot of reading," she said in a Rolling Stone interview.

I find out that the author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

never described who Dorothy should be

because everybody – all women, all men have a Dorothy,

a youthful something inside them that's searching for who they are.

I know I certainly did."

I also feel certain that Diana Ross knew how well that statement described her.

She is a person whose youthful energy and quest to define herself had already, by 1977, influenced a generation.

But casting a 33 year-old in the role of Dorothy was not a foregone conclusion.

At 15, Stephanie Mills was achieving stellar reviews in the Broadway musical.

A lot of people couldn't see how a thrity-something Miss Ross could compete with the young ingénue for the role.

One of the sceptics was Berry Gordy Jr, the head of Motown

who Diana Ross had worked with ever since she was a teenager, the man who had helped make her a star.

Up until then, Gordy had been one of Ms Ross' biggest advocates.

Diana Ross – Gordy's muse.

A few years before The Wiz,

the two had had huge success on the big screen with her oscar-nominated film debut as Billie Holiday in the 1972 biopic, Lady Sings the Blues.

But Gordy did not see Diana Ross as Dorothy;

he thought she was too old.

What Gordy didn't understand is that Diana Ross is from the future.

Diana Ross couldn't have predicted this

but her portrayal of Dorothy as a single adult

who can't seem to move out of her family's house

is a pretty accurate forecast of Black girl millennials.

We've grown up in an era where the space between 18 to 35

looks less like adulthood and much more like an extended adolescence.

Many of us, like Diana Ross' Dorothy,
have had to move back home into our childhood bedrooms
as we take inventory of our college degrees, career goals and the constantly rising cost of living
while we try to figure stuff out.

When I watch The Wiz now,
I see a twenty-something school teacher
living with her aunt and uncle
and understand this Dorothy so much better.

She is a much more relevant version of us
than any other Dorothy could be.

So that is an excerpt in which I talk about Diana Ross starring in
a Motown adaptation of The Wizard of Oz, The Wiz
in the 1970s. In 1978.

And how much it continues to be a reflection of the future.

That Diana Ross basically plays a Black girl millennial
back in 1978.

Which I think is the perfect merging of the present and the past.
It's like she was looking into our futures.

Also when we reflect on that time now,
how you bring the different dimensions together actually,
makes us think...

I mean 1970s, 80s...

In the 1940s the RnB movement or culture
was a kind of rising.

So we have the 1940s, then we have the 1980s.

We are of the 80s. Of the generation of the 80s. Born in the 80s.

I'm not that old!

You know that in African culture
the more time you have passed on this earth
the more respected you are.

Because we suppose that the more you see, hear, listen, do
the more you learn and the more you can share.

This is usually the wise person.

But to talk about how the multi-dimensional spaces are one in your book,
that you also anticipated by reflecting on RnB

as something which people would say as the past

if we think of history as a line

that Westerners have manipulated to say that:

We have the past and it's always about going further.

Production. Progress. We never sleep because we have to work again.

But to understand that this is all talking to each other as a cycle,

actually to have Diana Ross in our generation now,

I wonder... how you see her in the time

... we talk about neoliberalism

but did it ever change in her time?

Did she have better conditions?

Or do we have another understanding of what adulthood is?

No, I don't think she had better conditions.

One of the things I reflected on when it comes to her legacy and just the conversation of:

What is happening in global southern culture?

What happens when we ascribe this relationship of time to the African diaspora, it's that, since things that need a chronology are often things that can be sold, it's hard to sell somebody something that is "old" unless we re-brand it as something vintage or antique.

But that's hard to do with people.

It's hard to sell someone one the concept of a person being valuable because they are older in the commercial culture that we often operate out of.

That's a product of neoliberalism and capitalism.

So, with Diana Ross, she is somebody...

there's an article I quote from Marxism Today from the 80s that talks about her being

the only person of her time to be successful in that very mainstream capitalist way.

Yet, there was a conscious decision on her part in terms of the roles she chose to play, particularly on screen, to create an iconography.

To go beyond the idea of: What will sell now?

Because her movies were fraught with a lot of tension in terms of the choices, their commercial viability.

Can she play Billie Holiday?

Going back into the 30s and 40s.

Does she have the chops to pull that off?

Can she play a teenager when she's 30?

Can she play Mahogany, which she did later.

Which was this ubiquitous bon vivant,

was a model and moved to Rome and did all of these different things.

There was always this question – whether or not these were places where she belonged.

Either because of her age or race or femininity.

The wonderful thing about Diana Ross is that

she projected into the idea of what was needed to make an icon and not necessarily a celebrity.

She talks a lot about how an artist is born but an icon is made.

She definitely thought about her image as a made thing.

That's why there's a timelessness and a recursiveness, a circularity

to the ways these images of her keep popping up

as if they are current.

There's this beautiful photograph by Ruven Afanador –

of her enjoying a rib, she's holding a rib.

She's wearing an afro.

This picture is in 1996. She was well into her forties.

But it's the picture... It's so hard to place.

Was this her during the Supreme era?

Was this her in 2020?

It could be her from any time.

That's part of the way a true icon works.

It's that we continue to gain glory and gratification by returning to the image.

With a certain kind of spirituality, religiosity.
Especially since our pop world has replaced that impetus for a lot of us in our religious context.
It's nice to see someone who places value in a long standing career.
In long term things. Not just the idea:
What's going to be the "now moment"?
I do very much feel that Diana Ross was always looking into the cultural future.
Her version of Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz
as a woman who is 26 and unmarried
and a school teacher living at home – that was unheard of in the 70s.
She would have been a real weirdo
based on the way culture worked during the 70s.
A very heteronormative idea of the woman:
get married and how they live their lives.
But in 2020 that feels very comfortable, very real.
I have tonnes of girlfriends for whom that's been the truth.
That was the truth for me.
When I was in my mid twenties I was still figuring things out.
I love that part of her career.
I love exploring the ways...
her pop career in particular does this work to transcend time.

In terms of being a woman, being an activist,
you bring also another voice who speaks about her, which is Nina Simone.
If you would like to share that quote...

Yeah!

I'll talk a little bit about that.

Because especially in that neoliberal context
that question of
who can compete
and who is valuable?

It's one thing that was really difficult for Nina Simone
because of being a dark skinned activist, artist and singer,
there was a direct juxtaposition between Eurocentric features
that Diana Ross famously had
and that more Afrocentric look that was curated in Nina Simone's persona
which were both things that were natural to who they were
and their own particular brand of humanity and femininity.

But dealing with commercialism, that face was also a measure of
where they could go and what kind of attention they could get.

Nina Simone had this quote about Diana Ross where she talked about how... :

"I was never on the cover of Ebony or Jet.
They wanted white looking women like Diana Ross –
light and bright."

In thinking of that, when Nina Simone refers to Ross as "light and bright",
she brings awareness to the colour bias against women with darker skin
but also ignores the fact that Diana Ross had made Black women visible
in a time when they weren't seen at all.

And definitely not in our entirety.

Without photographs of both Nina Simone and Diana Ross

we would not have a complete vision of a Black girl –
political, charismatic, passionate and indisputably powerful.
Nina Simone chronicled our civil rights as a woman
whose pan-African style highlighted our pride and intelligence.
Diana Ross created a Black woman whose nation building was so ubiquitous
white people had to acknowledge its equivalence to theirs.
Of course, we weren't supposed to like Diana Ross.
We weren't supposed to like either of these women.
Yet they took on a world rife with prejudice as infidels
guarded with deep personal and cultural Black girl love.

This goes back to humanity,
this goes back to water.
It definitely goes back to the water!

Take me to the water

Take me to the water

Take me to the water
To be baptized

None but the righteous

None but the righteous

None but the righteous
Shall be saved

So take me to the water
Take me to the water

Take me to the water
To be baptized
I'm going back home,
I say I'm going back home now
Going back home
Can't stay here no longer
So I'm going back home,
Going back home now
Going back home
To be...

To be...
To be baptized

Wow!
Going back home to be baptised.
You mentioned Nina Simone before.
We were talking about humanity

and that all we talk about, what has been changed,
the condition of humans on earth,
changed to the point that it makes it difficult for us to live with earth
although we come from water, from sun, from earth.
It's important to remember that this is not about Africa, or being a woman,
or being an activist.
It's really about going back to the water, on being human.
So many manipulations of what and who should be human have been done.
We know that.
Who has the right.
But it was not about property – I own something.
I own the earth.
But how do we share that – about where we come from?
I found that so strong.
That line: to go back. To be born actually.
It makes me think of how in ancient African and ancient Egyptian tradition,
what the Greeks mentioned as hieroglyphs
which is translated as "divine inscriptions",
was actually Mdu Ntr, the language of the ancient Egyptians.
This translates as "divine speech".
These were what they would write on papyrus.
They were put in tombs so that on the passage from earth to the afterlife
they could be at ease and be born again or continue their travels.
It's a kind of inscription into the future.
That's why I found it powerful –
how you write about Diana Ross and Nina Simone.
And, talking about Diana Ross.
What you're doing, when you inscribe on paper,
is sending this moment, condition, this way of living, being
into something which is in another dimension.
Which the Egyptians thought of as being the dream.
So that moment...
I remember when you were talking about your book, you said:
Where is this place that we could live in in peace?
I wonder: where is this place for you?
For me, right now, it's writing. It's on the page.
It's the safest place for me to construct a world
in which there is kindness and shelter for Black girlhood.

It's really there that you put this in materiality.
As in, something you can touch and make visible.
I'm hoping for those physical spaces.
Constantly searching for how I can expand those spaces
and make those spaces through my work.
But right now, for me, especially given the time period we're living in right now,
the safest space for me right now is books, the page.
Spending that close and intimate time with
the world as I want to envision it.

We know we have that moment now, also.

That moment that's talking about how we bring together not only the enhancement through Rhythm and Blues but also inscription putting us into the future and here we are, and are also in a certain moment of time, and just being here with Nina Simone and Diana Ross, with the various spirits that you have in your book.

I wonder...

Because I thought that would share something about the roots of soul.

To go back to where we come from, the roots,

but also the reflections on the existence,

which is, we talked about ancient Egypt, in Africa,

of course in many cultures, all the cultures we talk about: where do we come from?

What I find interesting, is one text by

a person who is very important for the Afro-American movement,

of enhancing the culture.

This is Dr. Molefi Kete Asante who was remembering

where the root of the word "philosophy" comes from.

He says:

Most Europeans who write books on etymology

do not consider Zulu, Xhosa, Yoruba or Amharic

when coming to conclusions about what is known or unknown.

They never think that a term used by European language may have come from Africa.

There are two parts to the word "philosophy".

It comes from the Greek word "philo",

meaning brother or lover,

and "sophia" meaning "wisdom" or "wise".

Thus a philosopher is called a "lover of wisdom".

The origin of "sophia" is clear in the African language, Mdu Ntr,

the language of ancient Egypt,

where the word "Seba," meaning "the wise"

appears first in 2052 BC

in the tomb of Antef I,

long before the existence of Greece or Greek.

The word became "Sebo" in Coptic and "Sophia" in Greek.

As to the philosopher, the lover of wisdom,

that is precisely what is meant by "Seba," the Wise,

in ancient tomb writings of the Egyptians.

Then we have to say that the Greeks who were then going to Ancient Egypt,

before invading it, they were getting their knowledge from there.

Aristotle, Plato, Herodotus.

They were... Augustine was also from there.

It reminds me...

Thinking about Toni Morrison,

I believe it was in her final essay collection where she talks about

even the conception of the Greeks as part of white culture

was something that happened as a transition in the 20th century.

That previous to that, Greek culture, the culture in which...

those of us who live in a westernised context associate with philosophy,

that those people were never expected to be white.

That Greek culture was thought of as something that was outside of that.
That it was still the purview of people of colour.
Coming through the history of Black people,
through the African diaspora,
where this knowledge of...
this love of that kind of wisdom originated.
I think it's important to say that even Plato, Aristotle – they were also saying it in their scripts.
In Platos' Phaedrus he was saying that,
really, the inspiration they get from the practice of thinking of existence
comes from the Egyptians.
And women were acknowledged as philosophers.
Not only Sufi but we have all our priestesses
and people who we know that
the concept of God in ancient African tradition
was man and woman.
But mostly focussing on the woman
because we know how...
this is what enhances being together...
Not only coming to earth comes from the woman
but also the practice of community.
I want to remember that.
That it's not the Greeks who were making a secret out of that.
But that, as you say, some people were not interested in saying
we all share with them on earth
but we were first.
Mostly, that comes from the time of Hegel.
There's a lot of research on that. When the canon changed.
We know that Hegel advised to change – to take women out, Sufi women,
to take Africans out.
But coming to that moment, here together...
As we look at the stars, the sun, at Maat the Goddess of the sun.
She is the daughter of the God of the sun, Re,
and she balances the moment of being on earth.
So, actually she is our law.
That's why I think it would be great to come
step by step to the end, which will be the beginning of the cycle,
I think, I hope for
this time now to change, the time we live in.
That's why we would like to now put us into the moment of a poem
by Tracey K. Smith read by my colleague
Kelly Krugman of Savvy Contemporary
and of our show on Savvyzar Radio.

It makes me think about Tracey K. Smith
who has this poem that she wrote for her father who was working on the Hubble telescope.
So, Niel De Grass Tyson, Hubbel telescope, cosmos, space...
I was thinking to read a segment of it, this is maybe a nice point
as we are contemplating the physics element of the way that time is relative.
This is the third stanza in a poem called,
My God, It's Full of Stars.

Perhaps the great error is believing we're alone,
That the others have come and gone —a momentary blip—
When all along, space might be choc-full of traffic,
Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel nor see,
Flush against us, living, dying, deciding,
Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere,
Bowing to the great stars that command,
Pitching stones at whatever are their moons.
They live wondering if they are the only ones,
knowing only the wish to know,
And the great black distance they —we—flicker in.

Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last,
Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on at twilight.
Hearing the engines flare, the horns not letting up,
the frenzy of being.
I want to be one notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial.
Wide open, so everything floods in at once.
And sealed tight, so nothing escapes.
Not even time,
Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke.
So that I might be sitting now beside my father
As he raises a lit match to the bowl of his pipe
For the first time in the winter of 1959.

The first time I heard Nina Simone,
I was four women.
I was in the hallways of my high school spitting a Lauryn Hill verse.
A Metaphor: defecation. The vehicle;
Nina Simone its tenor.
But I didn't know who she was.
I'd gloss over her name everytime time the Fugees track, Ready or Not, played,
making up my own words,
determining my own meaning.
Then one day, the teacher stopped me:
What did you say?
I mumbled something indecipherable.
Simone. That's what she says.
She tells me of Lauryn Hill,
sweetly condescending.
I put a Nina Simone disc in my monthly order of BMG club CDs.
When it arrives, Four Women is the first song I listen to.
In 1963, when Nina Simone first heard that four little girls had died
in the bombing of a Birmingham church,
instead of taking to the streets,
she took to her garage to build a zip gun.
I am not unfamiliar with the spirit that brings a woman to a gun.
One of the stories I always return to about the women in my family

is that my great-grandmother shot her husband in the foot and ran off
leaving behind him and her seven or eight children.
She sounds like a verse in a Nina Simone song.
I had it in my mind to go out and kill someone, recalls Simone,
referring to the murders in her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*.
It was only when Nina's then husband and manager
convinced Nina to come out of the garage,
reminding her that her best means of intervention had always been her music
that she went to her piano and composed, *Mississippi Goddam*,
her first protest song.
What I take from both these Black women,
is that our survival depends on self preservation.
Although my great-grandmother was inspired to use a gun
because of domestic violence, not domestic terrorism,
the instinct feels the same.

Black women have battled against back-breaking labour and brute force,
against bombs and abuse,
against subjugation and silence
to ensure the next one of us women survives.
It is not a pleasant narrative.
My family rarely talk about all the events that led
to my great-grandmother abandoning all her offspring, including my great-grandmother,
excuse me, including my grandmother.
She returned years later to receive her children.
But by the time many of the boys had grown into men,
my grandmother, the only girl,
was a mother with kids of her own.

I have one other story of my great-grandmother.
My grandmother is in her early twenties.
The man she's dating threatens to beat her in front of my young mother, aunt and uncle.
The children run across the street to get their grandma in the house she now lives in.
She follows them back to the house brandishing a heavy, cast iron skillet.
The man's back is turned to her as he lifts his fists to hit my grandmother.
"If you hit her," my great-grandmother says,
"Imagine what I will do to you with this."
The violence that erupted from these women is provocation and necessity.
Had Nina Simone taken to the streets with a gun that day,
we would have lost her voice.
Goddam.
To think of my life without Nina singing in it.
Singing into it.
I cannot imagine the kind of woman I would have become
without either Nina Simone or my great-grandmother.
I have always been a woman on the verge of a gun.
My anger is quiet, reserved.
But I feel so close to the edge of a trigger,
that I feel the metal cool and codify in my hand.
I grip a pen instead of a song, or a skillet, or a trigger.

I do not consider this strategy for assassination a passive action.
It is hard to tell the story of who Black girls are
without a hidden massacre.
The dark is our beauty but is also the lot we have been cast
to the shadows, the margins
to the places most people shield their eyes because they do not want to see.

In Four Women, we are a field worker, a sex worker,
the child of rape.
We are also murderously angry.
It is to the shame of humanity
and not our bodies
that we have been these things.
I've seen Four Women examined
as a reclamation of the lives of the little girls
killed in Alabama that day.
But it's not an interpretation I agree with.
Nor do I see Nina displaying the opposing tragedies
of African-Americans based on their hair textures, and complexions.
The song ending in the voice of the bitter and brown Nina herself.

For me, the four women are all Nina Simone.
A conjoined creation of one Eunice Kathleen Waymon
the woman that became the singer, the activist and the pseudonym.

Nina Simone, the young Black girl from North Carolina
who dreamed of becoming a concert pianist.
Instead she surrounded us in genius.
She made us a history.
She wrote herself into who we are.

In the second to last set of verses of Four Women,
the song points a gun at the past.
The song's final narrator telling us her bitterness stems from
being the descendent of slaves.

"What do they call me?",
Nina asks as her piano makes the ground tremble with dramatic tension.
She answers, gathering her girls together in the plurality of one name,
"Peaches."
A metaphor.
The fruit.
The vehicle.
Us.
The tenor.
The foliage wide.
The blossoms fragrant.
We, the tart, taugt and petulent,
we, the sweetly gnarled fruit,
fall into the bed grass, nestling into the ground to begin anew.

We have survived the hostile soil.
Our hard pit.
Our ripe flesh.
Our tree feeds the world.
Some of us given.
Some of us ripped from us.
Some of us still unfurling.
But we keep the orchard alive.
We keep us alive.
I write to you, nestled under our dark canopy.
I hear you, pressing my cheek to the stiff bark.
I hear you.
My skin is...

My skin is black
My arms are long

My hair is woolly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
Inflicted again and again

What do they call me
My name is Aunt Sarah

My name is Aunt Sarah

Aunt Sarah

My skin is yellow
My hair is long

Between two worlds
I do belong

My father was rich and white
He forced my mother late one night

What do they call me

My name is Saffronia

My name is Saffronia

My skin is tan
My hair is fine
My hips invite you
My mouth like wine

Whose little girl am I?

Anyone who has money to buy

What do they call me

My name is Sweet Thing

My name is Sweet Thing

My skin is brown

My manner is tough

I'll kill the first mother I see

My life has been rough

I'm awfully bitter these days

Because my parents were slaves

What do they call me

My name is...

Peaches